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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Woodford, Darryl](#) (2009) The fallacy of the Magic Circle. In *Games Convention Online*, 31 July - 2 August 2009, Leipzig, Germany. (Unpublished)

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/75825/>

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The fallacy of the Magic Circle

Games Convention Online Conference
Leipzig, Germany -- 1 August 2009

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About me

- You might have noticed I'm not Richard Bartle. Sorry about that.
- Currently affiliated to IT University of Copenhagen.
- Working on research about the regulatory make-up of Virtual Worlds & other online environments

This presentation

- Will give a different perspective on this than Richard would have - from an observer/researcher non-versed in MMO design.
- Will identify where the magic circle is breached, and offer some predictions/observations on the direction I see games going.

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The “Magic Circle”

- I think the “magic circle” concept, as popularly defined, is irreparably flawed.
- In short: taken from Huizinga’s work, and often supported by the work of Apter and Salen/Zimmerman.
- But, this time, I’d like to avoid the semantics and interpretations of Huizinga.

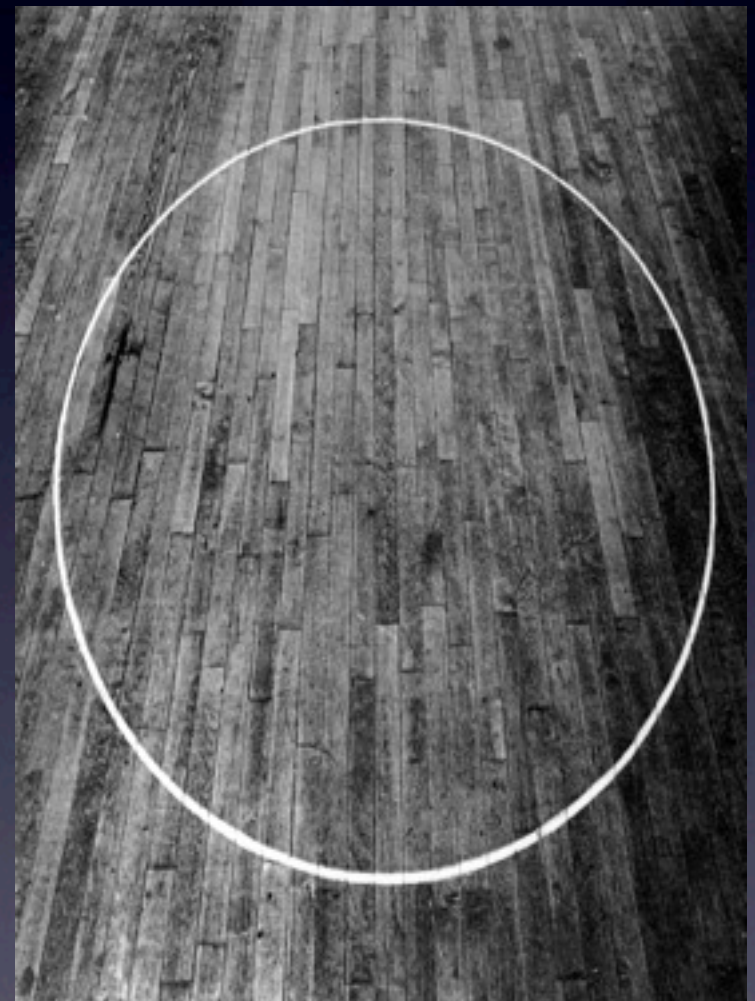
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Reviewing the Circle

- The chalk circle on the playground, demarcating the space for play.
- But even here, it's not truly 'separate' in the popular sense. Emotions carry forth both ways.



Improving the concept

- Castronova has proposed the 'membrane', and we had a seminar on revising the concept in Tampere 15 months ago.
- But is it worth it? The concept doesn't matter, it's the underlying principles that will shape the future.

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Who supports it?

- Game designers like it -- games should be special, separate from the rest of the world, protected.
- (Some) players like it - if it's just a game, separate from the rest of the world, players aren't taxed, aren't 'responsible' for actions within the world.

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And they're not (completely) wrong..



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Friday, 31 July 2009

Some protection is good

- Game companies want protection
- Players want protection
- Any argument that games are somehow 'special' is doomed to fail.
- It can't be a one-way street. Regulatory bodies, game developers and players need to work together.

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But games aren't unique

- Games are becoming as much part of the mainstream as TV and probably influence more.
- They impact on our private lives & finances.
- They impact on our social lives.
- They even impact on our performance at work (and not just for game researchers ;))

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Marking the breaches

- The circle is breached in both directions:
 - The real world can influence the real world
 - The virtual world can influence the real world.
- It's not necessarily good or bad, it's inevitable.

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Real --> Virtual

- This area gets a lot of attention
- Real money enters games and disrupts/ alters the virtual economy (sometimes designed, but often black market)
- Emotions also enter the game world -- does a good/bad day at work not alter the shape of your evening gaming session?

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Real --> Virtual

- Real world law (& moral standards) have the potential (and are beginning in practice) to interfere with games
- Countries are considering banning environments (Australia/Second Life)
- Games (or environments) are being forced to change their rules (USA / Second Life / UIGEA)

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Virtual --> Real

- The previous two points stand
- Money can be generated in-game and transferred out.
- Emotions carry from inside the game session to outside. If I get gate-camped in Eve, ruining my play session, I'm going to be mad afterwards...

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Virtual --> Real

- The impact of game worlds on the real world is generally seen as negative.
- Classical argument - games are a waste of time - they lower productivity and create/cause social isolation / seclusion.

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Virtual --> Real

- But little attention is given to the positives
 - A means of expression -- gives a voice to those who may be unable to communicate well in society -- and can help overcome this.
 - Players obtain new skills and mindsets that aid them in the workplace.

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Virtual --> Real

- Games become a medium for new societies to form that would otherwise be geographically implausible - understanding of other cultures.
- Games potentially provide a platform for public policy to be tested and evaluated.

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Virtual --> Real

- Gaming terminology becomes part of the popular lexicon.
- Gamers become part of other media; Big Bang Theory, South Park among others demonstrate this to a degree you just didn't see with Monkey Island & Myst.
- And let's not even talk about Big Brother..

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Virtual --> Real

- Games are no longer self-contained, discussion and strategizing takes place in common rooms, workplaces and living rooms worldwide.
- In essence, almost everything we do, in game or not, has real world consequences upon ourselves and others.

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From a law perspective

- Benjamin Duranske proposes that: “An activity that occurs in a virtual world is subject to real-world law if the user undertaking the activity reasonably understood, or should have reasonably understood, at the time of acting, that the act would have real world implications.
- So what isn't covered by real-world law?

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So what does it all mean?

- So if we accept that both have significant influences on the other, what can we expect?
- As games become ever more a part of society, governments and lawyers will play an increasingly active role.

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So what does it all mean?

- As players see new ways to generate an income from such games:
- The objection from those who see it as ‘destroying the spirit’ will grow.
- The game companies will see new profit in cutting out such players and selling advantages themselves.

So what does it all mean?

- Players will start to realize the real world value of their in-game actions, and become increasingly litigious when they lose 'value'.
- And the taxman will want his cut!

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So what does it all mean?

- And new public policy questions will enter the mainstream:
- Should companies be able to shut down game worlds (= communities) at will?
- What rights should the ‘player’ (community member) have in such environments?

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So what does it all mean?

- Public policies that are proven successful in dealing with in-world issues will enter the real world.
- Corporations will realize the skills learnt in such games are transferable to the employment marketplace, if they utilize them correctly.

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So what does it all mean?

- Industry will face (short-term) threats from
 - Governments
 - Upset and litigious players
- Just look at gambling - yes the moral stakes are different, but as the WTO case showed, taxation and offshore money movement is a highly significant factor too.

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So what does it all mean?

- Somewhere along the line, the three major players will realize that only by compromise can a status quo be reached that satisfy all three.
- All groups need some rights, and all need some protections. That is the challenge facing all of us, whether academics, industry, players or government.

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To finish...

- As we'll shortly move into a panel session, I wanted to leave you with a thought experiment.
- One that probably won't be popular with the industry.

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To finish...

- Prerequisites:
 - Time = Money, both are an economic resource.
 - The game allows RMT, or there is a sufficiently populated grey market.
 - I kill a monster in a MMORPG. It takes 8 minutes. Let's say that time is worth \$3.

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To finish...

- 30% of the time the monster drops nothing. 40% of the time it drops Item A, worth \$3 on the market. 25% of the time it drops Item B, worth \$4 on the market. 5% of the time it drops Item C, worth \$15 on the market.
- Why is this different than playing a slot machine in an online casino?

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